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> *If we are to try to identify some of the most important aspects of the history of the Balkans, we cannot but point out the persistent vision of a surprisingly consistent utopia…*
> ~Andrej Grubacic[1]

The Commune, as a political form, was a reoccurring theme within Bulgaria's liberatory movement that fought against the Ottoman Empire, suggesting that its struggle was not only about independence but also about social revolution. Hristo Botev, one of the most significant Bulgarian revolutionaries of the 19th century, in his article "Ridiculous Weep" (written in 1871 in defence of the Paris Commune), claims that the goal of the Commune is "to turn the human into something more than a son of God and a citizen – not as an ideal, but as a human from whom the destiny of his city depends, and

[1] theanarchistlibrary.org

not vice versa"[2]. Bulgarian writer and poet Ivan Vazov, while in Romania, got acquainted with the ideas of Bulgaria's liberatory movement. His famous play "The Outcasts", published in 1884, depicted Bulgarian revolutionaries who embrace the idea of the Commune, claiming that with it there will be no rich, nor poor; everything will be shared equally[3]. In his 1907 "History of the April Uprising", historian Dimitar Strashimirov describes the goals set by the liberatory movement in the following manner: "they thought not only for dethatching the foreign yoke from their backs, but they had also developed thirst for republic and commune"[4].

There are even attempts at realizing these ideas in practice during the April Uprising (1876) – the biggest insurrection that played a major role in Bulgaria's liberation. A testimony of that is the personal account of this rebellious event by Atanas Shopof, written in 1876. Shopof participated in the uprising as a close collaborator of the Bulgarian revolutionary Georgi Benkovski and was a first-hand witness of the creation of a short-lived commune in the city of Panagyurishte. His book describes a large meeting of guerilla groups that elected a committee tasked with preparing a plan for the uprising. According to which all property, goods, flour, wheat etc. shall be held in common, the monetary system shall be abolished, as well as central houses shall be appointed in which the committees of the people will hold their meetings[5]. The plan also foresees the establishment of communes, which were to be in constant contact with one another – a type of federation[6]. This program is strongly reminiscent of the measures passed by the Paris Commune, which took place just 5 years prior to the April Uprising.

[2] libcom.org

[3] Ivan Vazov: The Outcasts (1884) (available online: www.slovo.bg)

[4] prqkademokraciq.wordpress.com

[5] Атанас Шопов: Десетдневно царуване. Из българското въстание в 1876 г. Дневници на един бунтовник (есен 1876)

[6] Op.cit. 4

cavalry and artillery – crushed the resistance of the local population.

Gerzhikov and many of his guerillas managed to escape from the Ottoman rule into the independent parts of Bulgaria. There, the great anarchist continued to propagate his ideas through the publication of newspapers, such as "Free Society", "Antiauthority" and others. In 1910, Gerdzhikov together with another anarchist – Pavel Deliradev – wrote the anti-militaristic brochure "War or Revolution". In 1912 he was once again leading a guerilla group in the Strandzha region, this time during the Balkan war. Later on, in 1919, he was among the co-founders of the Federation of Anarcho-communists in Bulgaria. After the monarcho-fascist coup in 1923, he was forced to flee the country and live in Belgrade, Vienna and Berlin. After the regime change of 9 September 1944, Gerdzhikov called on his comrades to support the new socialist regime, to only get disappointed by it soon afterwards and revoke his support[12]. In 1947, he will even categorically refuse to be nominated by the regime for an award for his participation in the Ilinden uprising. He will die of old age in 1947 in the city of Sofia.

All these efforts at implementing in practice the Commune form come to indicate that there is a deep egalitarian tradition of universal human equity in the Balkan region. It is crucial that this alternative history is remembered and used by grassroots movements as the roots from which once again political projects of equality and justice can flourish around the region.

[12] bg.wikipedia.org

According to Shopof's account, with the beginning of the uprising, Benkovski and his guerillas took over the city of Panagyurishte on April 20. From the very beginning, they begin implementing the initial plan: all large cattle are gathered in a common space (called "Obshta Bachya"), although individual households get to keep their pigs and chickens. Shopof's account documents that during the commune all people had equal rights, with all having equal access to the common cattle. Money is abolished, with all necessary goods (like food) being freely available, while everything else was distributed through a voucher system, whose aim was greater justice.

Unfortunately, the Panagyurishte commune will only last for 10 days, before the Ottoman troops put an end to it. Because of its short life, there was no time for the emergence of popular organs of self-management. What we see was the influence that the Paris Commune and the libertarian ideas had on Benkovski, his guerillas and the broader Bulgarian liberation movement of that period. Despite the brutal suppression of the uprising, the Commune will retain a central place in the imagination of many Bulgarian revolutionaries. A notable example of this is the emergence of the Strandzha Commune a decade later.

The Strandzha Commune, known also as the Strandzha Republic, was a short-lived social experiment with clear libertarian characteristics. It was declared on 19th August 1903 in the Strandzha Mountains (located between today's Bulgaria and Turkey) by the Internal Macedonian Adrianople Revolutionary Organization rebels, among whose commanders at this period was the immensely significant anarchist Mihail Gerdzhikov.

After a series of successful mass uprisings, supported by guerilla actions, a large section of Eastern Thrace was placed under the control of the rebels. Around the mountainous region of Strandzha, for three weeks the people celebrated. A new community was established, based on values such as free-

dom, equality, and solidarity. All public matters in towns and villages within these liberated territories were brought to popular vote and the old quarrels between the local Bulgarian and Greek populations were left behind. Tax registers were burned. For over 20 days the Strandzha Commune functioned in a libertarian manner, with the absence of any kind of state authority.

This was also evident from the military structure of the guerillas. Its leading organ was not the typical army headquarters, but something called "Leading Combat Body". This choice of the rebels indicated two things – that this military organ had only a temporary character (i.e. until the end of the fighting), and secondly, that it had a purely coordinative role in the revolution. Christo Silyanov, a student of Gerdzhikov, says that the rebels didn't call it headquarters because they didn't want it to "reek" of militarism[7].

Another libertarian element is that there was never a question of centralization of power. The people from the liberated settlements elected councils and commissions among their own ranks, instead of mayors and representatives[8]. The role of the former is to coordinate and administer, while the latter is to rule. These councils and commissions function under the control of the rebelled people, who have regained power.

It must be noted that there are many similarities between Gerdzhikov's attitude towards the radical empowerment of the people and that of the Makhnovist movement in Ukraine that emerged 15 years later. They both viewed the role of their guerilla armies as supportive and temporary, while the question of public administration was one that has to be left to the councils of the local populations. In one of their calls[9], the Makhnovists wrote that:

[7] theanarchistlibrary.org

[8] Ibid.

[9] "To the Entire Working Population of the Town of Aleksandrovsk and the Surrounding Area", 7th October 1919

The revolutionary insurrectionary army sets itself the goal of helping the villagers and workers... and does not interfere with civil life... It urges the working population of the town and the surrounding to immediately begin independent organizational work...

After describing the first military victories of the uprising, Gerdzhikov wrote[10] that:

> *We somehow began setting up our own institutions... The population was rejoicing, in the villages people danced and held feasts. There was no more 'This is mine and that is yours' — in the hills and forests before and after the congress we had set up storehouses: the whole harvest was deposited there as flour and grain in common stores. The livestock also became common property... We issued an appeal to the ethnic Greek population in Greek, explaining that in taking over territory we weren't fighting for the re-establishment of a Bulgarian empire, but only for human rights; we explained to them that as Greeks they too would benefit from this and it would be good if they would support us morally and materially...*

In his memoirs, Gerdzhikov remembers[11] one specific example of expropriation and redistribution of goods: in the city of Akhtopol there was a salt harvestry, where at that time were being stored over 200 thousand kg of salt. The villages in the region were poor and in need of salt, so Gerdzhikov and his guerillas broke into the salt storage and left it open for the peasants to take the salt and redistribute it.

The Strandzha Commune functioned from the beginning of the uprising and it lasted until the end of August 1903, when a massive 40,000 Ottoman army – well-armed with infantry,

[10] M. Gerdzhikov, Memoirs..., p. 75

[11] Ibid., p. 76.